

By: Hon. Pamela L. Reeves

United States District Judge, Eastern District of Tennessee

SARAH Y. SHEPPEARD, 2014 GOVERNORS' AWARD RECIPIENT



On December 12, 2014, Knoxville lawyer Sarah Sheppard was honored by the Knoxville Bar Association when she was awarded the Governor's Award. That award is the highest honor given by the KBA. It is no surprise that Sarah was chosen for this award. If you say the name "Sarah Sheppard" out loud at any gathering of Knoxville lawyers, inevitably, several people will say, "Sarah is one of the smartest lawyers I have ever met." And it is true. Some of us learned that long before we even became lawyers. Sarah is the only one I know who could give birth to a child in her first year of law school and to another child at the end of her third year of law school and still end up graduating only 6 months late, all the while doing Law Review and graduating on the Dean's List.

Since Sarah began her legal career in 1980, she has been the epitome of what a Governor's Award winner should be. No one works harder for her clients or for the legal community as a whole, and few have achieved more recognition for their efforts.

First and foremost, Sarah is a good lawyer. One indication of her skills as a lawyer is the fact that she was certified as a civil trial specialist in 1997 by both the Tennessee Commission on Continuing Legal Education and Specialization and the National Board of Trial Advocacy.

Sarah has spent much of her legal career representing clients in high-stakes domestic matters where the parties are going through extremely traumatic personal experiences. She has handled these cases with skill and diplomacy. Additionally, she has served as mediator for numerous other complicated domestic and other civil cases since becoming a Rule 31 mediator in 1998.

Sarah has also worked tirelessly to improve the legal profession as a teacher, as a bar leader, and as a writer. She was an adjunct Trial Practice and Family Law professor at the UT College of Law from 1987-2002. Since 1991, Sarah has co-authored the Tennessee Law of Evidence with Don Paine and then Neal Cohen. She has lectured at dozens of CLEs across the state and at TBA's SKI CLE for more than a dozen years.

Lawyers across the state recognize her as a result of the Tennessee Law Institute lectures she has been giving since 1988. An evaluation

during her first year said simply "Ditch the Blonde." Fortunately, TLI did not take this advice. Sarah will be the first to admit that having to do TLI this year without Don Paine has been a challenge, but as usual, Sarah has risen to the occasion.

Looking back from the perspective of 20 years and seven female KBA presidents later, it is easy to understand why Sarah was the one to crack the glass ceiling when she became the first woman to be elected president of the KBA in 1994. One of the great things Sarah did as KBA president was to start the KBA's tradition of building a Habitat House. Those who worked on the house will tell you that Sarah was not just there for moral support. She literally climbed on the roof rafters, effectively wielding a hammer from her very own tool belt. For this and her many other accomplishments, Sarah was recognized as one of the YWCA's Women of the Year in 1993.

For many years, judges across the state have waited with bated breath at judicial conferences for Sarah to explain exactly what they meant when they wrote their decisions. From 1999 to 2008, they shuddered when it was their turn to appear before her when she chaired the Tennessee Judicial Evaluation Commission--the body that made the decision as to which appellate judges should be recommended for retention.

Being one of the original members of the Hamilton Burnett American Inn of Court and the Knoxville Bar Foundation are just two more examples of Sarah's leadership in the world of legal professionalism. She has served on so many TBA boards, committees and commissions that it would take more words than Marsha would give me to list them all. Last year, she jumped back into a leadership role as a member of the Tennessee Bar Association's Board of Governors.

Despite her massive commitments of time and energy to the practice of law, Sarah has maintained an amazing life balance. She and her husband, Ben Alford, fell head over heels in love when she was a sophomore and he was a senior at Bearden High School. They were married in 1974 and forty years later, they are still madly in love. They have two wonderful children--Jennifer Akerman, a professor at UT's College of Architecture, and Lee Alford, the Housing Development Officer for Community Housing Partners in Richmond, Virginia. Least, but certainly not least in her heart, Sarah has two adorable grandchildren, Emma and Hayden Alford.

But there is much more to Sarah Sheppard. The Good Samaritan Episcopal Church is very much a part of her life, and Sarah has served in many leadership capacities with the church, including being chair of the local vestry, providing floral arrangements for the altars on Sunday mornings, and serving as the Chancellor (chief legal officer) for the entire East Tennessee diocese. Sharing Sarah's love of all growing things, I personally consider the fact Sarah is a Certified Master Gardener to be one of her greatest accomplishments. As though she did not have enough to occupy her time, Sarah's most recent challenge has been to take up flying lessons.

The people who work with Sarah are the first to agree she has brought "distinction and honor to the legal profession" through her "enduring, faithful and distinguished service to the community." Additionally, they will tell you as will Charles Swanson, her law partner for nearly 20 years, that "while she is the greatest law partner anyone could ever have, she is an even better friend."